

VZCZCXRO3704
PP RUEHBI RUEHCI RUEHDBU RUEHLH RUEHNEH RUEHPW
DE RUEHKA #1008/01 3021507
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 291507Z OCT 09 ZDK
FM AMEMBASSY DHAKA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 9607
INFO RUCNCLS/ALL SOUTH AND CENTRAL ASIA COLLECTIVE
RUEHRO/AMEMBASSY ROME 0506
RUEHFL/AMCONSUL FLORENCE
RHHJJPI/PACOM IDHS HONOLULU HI

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 DHAKA 001008

SIPDIS

FROM AMBASSADOR MORIARTY TO AMBASSADOR VERVEER

E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/28/2019
TAGS: [KWMN](#) [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [ECON](#) [EAID](#) [PTER](#) [SOCI](#) [KPAO](#) [BG](#)
SUBJECT: BANGLADESH SCENESETTER FOR GLOBAL WOMEN'S ISSUES
AMBASSADOR VERVEER

DHAKA 00001008 001.4 OF 003

Classified By: Ambassador James Moriarty, Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

Summary

¶1. (C) Ambassador Verveer, we look forward to welcoming you to Bangladesh, a secular democracy with a moderate Muslim-majority population of nearly 160 million people friendly to the United States. U.S. engagement with Bangladesh focuses on what we call the three "D"s: democracy, development and denial of space to terrorists. Our work here advances U.S. interests in South Asia and beyond on Muslim outreach, climate change, food security, UN peacekeeping and other global issues. Bangladesh faces daunting problems: recurring natural disasters; poverty; overpopulation; porous borders attractive to terrorists; and a political system that features two dominant parties, the Awami League (AL) led by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) led by Chairwoman Khaleda Zia, which revel in petty partisanship.

¶2. (C) Yet that is only part of the story. Bangladesh has made huge progress in a number of areas, and is no longer the "international basket case" once described by a former Secretary of State. It is now an emerging democracy that in December 2008 held its freest, fairest and most credible Parliamentary elections since independence in 1971. Since taking office in January 2009, Hasina has taken a strong public stance against Islamic extremism and backed it up with action. Moreover, the economy has shown surprising resiliency to the global recession and looks set to continue its record of solid growth since 1991.

Return to Democracy

¶3. (SBU) Bangladesh, the seventh most populous country in the world, returned to Democracy with Parliamentary elections in December 2008 after two years of an unelected Caretaker Government (CTG). As Bangladesh returns to democracy, the governing class has the opportunity to embrace and move away from the tradition of zero-sum, patronage-based politics. Since independence, Bangladeshi politics have been dynastic and winner-take-all, rife with corruption, frequently violent, and punctuated by periods of military rule. The government is overly-centralized and fails to provide adequate basic services to much of its population. Weak rule of law and ineffective civilian control of the military and intelligence services further impede good governance and respect for human rights.

Free and Fair Elections

14. (SBU) The CTG interruption of the status quo politics left the major parties deeply divided, with many leaders emerging from prolonged periods of imprisonment (many facing corruption charges) and exile. The CTG initiated several reforms to the country's violence- and corruption-plagued political system. Among its successes was creation of a new, credible voter list, which included photo identification, of more than 80 million Bangladeshis. The CTG also prevented intimidation in the run-up to the election and ensured polling day was peaceful; international and domestic monitors declared the election free, fair, and credible.

The Awami League Government

15. (C) Hasina's Awami League (AL) won an overwhelming majority at least in part due to a positive message promising an end to the hyper-partisanship of Bangladesh's traditional winner-take-all politics. (Note: Since the fall of the Ershad dictatorship in 1990, power has alternated between the two major parties: the Awami League (AL) and Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). Though led by bitter rivals, the parties' platforms differ little in substance. End note.) Hasina filled her Cabinet with many new faces, pushing from center stage many of the AL politicians closely associated with the dysfunctional politics of the past. The media, which faced pressure from military censors during the CTG, has blossomed in recent months, freely criticizing AL government policies. In August, Sheikh Hasina reshuffled her Cabinet and revamped party structures, accelerating the trend of installing individuals she considered personally loyal to her.

DHAKA 00001008 002.2 OF 003

Poisonous Interparty Rivalry

16. (C) Hasina has not yet risen above the vindictiveness and petty politics that have proven so debilitating to Bangladesh's democracy. A fight between the Awami League and the opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) over the seating chart for Parliament prompted an opposition boycott of the legislative body's general meetings that continues. BNP politicians, including party leader Khaleda Zia, face prosecution for corruption while cases against AL politicians initiated by the CTG have been dismissed.

Centralized Power Perpetuated

17. (C) The Awami League-dominated Parliament modified an ordinance approved by the CTG to establish elected upazilla (county) governments, rolling back this modest effort to establish representative local government. The modifications require upazilla chairpersons to follow the guidance of local Members of Parliament on development issues. While the Minister for Local Government said he expected local officials would ignore the advice since the law did not include sanctions, upazilla chairpersons have denounced the modifications as undemocratic and an affront to their authority.

Bangladesh Rifles Mutiny

18. (C) The mutiny of Bangladesh Rifles (BDR) border guards on February 25-26 underscored both the fragility and resiliency of Bangladesh's democracy. In the first hours of the rebellion, the border guards killed 57 army officers seconded to the BDR, prompting howls of outrage from army officers who felt the government should have moved more quickly to quash the mutiny. As events unfolded, strong public support buoyed

Hasina. Many newspapers praised her for handling the event with poise and preventing what could have been a much bigger bloodbath.

Denying Space to Extremism

¶9. (SBU) Bangladesh's strong national identity, the history of its liberation struggle, and the legacy of moderate Islam significantly limit popular support for extremism. However, previous lack of political will, the country's porous borders, ungoverned spaces, poor service delivery, and weak rule of law have allowed space for transnational and domestic terrorists and for other illicit activities, including the trafficking of people, arms, and narcotics. As highlighted by the deadly terrorist attack on Mumbai in November 2008, transnational terrorists are becoming increasingly active and bold in South Asia. They have in recent years used Bangladesh as a safe haven, transit point, and recruiting base.

¶10. (C) Soon after taking office, Prime Minister Hasina proposed creating a regional task force on security. Hasina also has signaled a strong interest in attacking the root causes of extremism. For example, she has made reform of Islamic schools known as madrassas a priority. Specifically, she wants to bring thousands of heretofore-independent madrassas under government regulation to ensure that they do not disseminate extremist ideologies and that their curriculum prepares students to enter the mainstream economy.

Promoting Economic Growth and Development

¶11. (U) Since 1991, Bangladesh's gross domestic product has grown more than five percent every year. Many social indicators are better than those in India, and average life expectancy has increased to 64 years for both men and women, up from 38 years back in the late 1970s. Bangladesh has dodged the worst effects of the current global economic crisis, at least for now. Economists predict Bangladesh's economy will again grow between five percent and six percent in 2009. Despite the global recession, Bangladesh's exports, mostly apparel, and remittances continue to grow, albeit at slower rates than previously.

Impediments to Economic Growth and Development

DHAKA 00001008 003.4 OF 003

¶12. (C) Even if Bangladesh weathers the global downturn, it still must address the challenges it has faced for the last decade and more: chronic power shortages, decaying transport infrastructure, a weak education system, a fragile financial sector, poor governance and low government revenues, particularly taxes. If the Government can tackle even some of these problems, GDP growth could increase beyond seven percent annually; stronger growth is needed to pull Bangladesh effectively out of poverty. Donors and investors are standing by to help; U.S. bilateral assistance to Bangladesh this year will exceed USD 160 million.

U.S. Private Sector Interest

¶13. (C) U.S. investors, particularly in power and energy, are eager to do business here. Government of Bangladesh leaders, including the Prime Minister, say they are committed to creating a favorable business environment that will strengthen the private sector and attract foreign investment. Government officials have been slow to follow through, however, and corruption, vested interests, and an opaque regulatory system continue to plague the business and investment environment.

Role of Women

¶14. (SBU) In many respects, Bangladesh's steps to empower women could serve as a model for Muslim-majority nations. Bangladesh has achieved the Millenium Development Goal of parity for girls in primary school enrollment, and a majority of middle-school students are girls. Micro-credit programs, like those of Grameen, and the booming apparel industry, which employs predominantly women, have contributed to the economic empowerment of women. Strong women hold top government positions, including that of Prime Minister, Foreign Minister, Agriculture Minister, and Leader of the Opposition. The government has taken steps to promote the participation of women in Parliament and at lower levels of government.

¶15. (SBU) Challenges remain, however. Women in Bangladesh still face discrimination, exclusion and injustice. Discriminatory laws and policies hinder equality, and socio-political conditions prevent women from exercising their rights. In poor households in particular, women are usually undernourished and often are victims of violence. Poor families frequently consider their daughters a burden, and many girls are forced into marriage at a young age.

U.S. Interests in Bangladesh

¶16. (C) This dynamic balance sheet of positives and negatives underscores the importance of U.S. Government engagement to help Bangladesh develop its democracy, its economy and its counterterrorism capabilities. Promoting democracy and economic development will help ensure that Bangladesh remains a moderate voice on the global stage receptive to President Obama's efforts to reach out to the Muslim world. Bangladesh also has an important stake in global issues that are priorities for the U.S., including food security, global climate change, global health, UN peacekeeping, and women's empowerment. Your visit will energize, intensify and deepen U.S.-Bangladesh partnership across this broad spectrum of shared interests.

MORIARTY